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ABSTRACT

The Center for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) studied the background, implementation, and effects of curriculum policies, including graduation requirements, student testing, curriculum controls, and indicators. This document examines the findings about curriculum policy in the school context. A total of 188 interviews were conducted at the state level in six states and 524 interviews in 59 local schools within those states. This paper concentrates on curriculum policy in high schools. The paper discusses three perspectives of curriculum policy in the school context: (1) the school as mediator of policy outcomes; (2) the school as policy critic; and (3) the school as policy constructor. Next, a methodological discussion of curriculum policy analysis is presented, followed by reasons why the perspectives of policy and school context are likely to be different. The lessons learned from the school as policy mediator, policy critic, and policy constructor all point in a similar direction: schools and teachers must be actively engaged in the exercise of constructing a high quality curriculum for their students; some types of curriculum policy have the potential for increasing stratification and thus lowering the overall quality of instruction; and schools and teachers have their own perspectives on curriculum policy. (32 references) (SI)

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Research and Conclusions From Three Views of Curriculum Policy in the School Context: The School as Policy Mediator, Policy Critic and Policy Constructor

William H. Clune
March 7, 1989

A draft of this paper was presented at a research conference, Effect of Reform on Secondary School Context, held April 19-20, 1988 in East Lansing, Michigan. The conference was jointly sponsored by the Center for Research on the Context of Secondary School Teaching (Stanford University and Michigan State University) and the Center for Policy Research in Education.

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Research and Conclusions From
Three Views of Curriculum Policy in the School Context:
The School as Policy Mediator, Policy Critic
and Policy Constructor

Bill Clune, March 4, 1989

Introduction

This paper is an overview of findings about curriculum policy and schools based on data from a large research project conducted by the Center for Policy Research in Education (CPRE). CPRE studied the background, implementation, and effects of curriculum policies, including graduation requirements, student testing, curriculum controls, and indicators (see, e.g., Clune, 1989, on graduation requirements and related policies). In addition to the 188 interviews conducted at the state level in 6 states, CPRE also conducted 524 interviews in 59 local schools within those states. I was asked to write a paper bridging the gap between the policy-centered focus of CPRE and the school and teaching-centered perspective of the Center for Research on the Context of Secondary School Teaching (CRCSST). In other words, what did we learn from our research about curriculum policy in the school context?

The paper concentrates on curriculum policy in high schools, because that was the area of my own research. It tends also to emphasize effects at the level of school planning and organization (for example, types of courses offered) rather than classroom teaching. We interviewed many teachers, but we did not do classroom observations and, hence, did not have much data on the interaction of curriculum policy and instructional practice (but see Richards & Shujaa, (1988) on interviews with teachers).

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: an introduction of the three perspectives; a methodological (or perhaps, better, epistemological) discussion how to analyze curriculum policy in the school context (especially how to handle the shifting normative perspectives created by looking at the topic from different viewpoints); a related discussion of general reasons why the perspectives of policy and school context are likely to be different; followed by three sections which are the heart of the paper describing the three types of lessons for policy offered by the school -- the school as policy mediator, policy critic, and policy constructor. After a short section on what probably would be learned from a deeper look at classrooms and instruction, the Conclusion draws some general lessons for curriculum policy.

The School as Policy Mediator, Critic, Constructor: An Introduction

The ultimate question about policy in the school context is how the perspective of school context changes our views of policy. In the case of curriculum policy, this transformation of perspective can be grasped conveniently by looking at policy from three different perspectives, each

deeper in the school context and less tightly or necessarily linked with policy as a reference point. While each perspective is, therefore, successively less "top down" and more "bottom up," even the most policy-oriented of the three perspectives is far more sensitive to field level action than the regulatory perspective which provoked the original bottom-up critique (Elmore, 1979).

The first and most policy-oriented question is how the school context mediates policy outcomes. Regardless of how curriculum policy is formulated, schools and teachers exercise an extraordinary amount of discretion about how the policy will be implemented (e.g., what kinds of courses will be offered to which kinds of students by which teachers through what pedagogy). Research on school-level decisions relevant to policy may suggest ways to make those decisions more consistent with policy goals.

The second perspective is the school as policy critic. The usefulness and effectiveness of recent curriculum reforms rest on a variety of empirically testable assumptions, for example, about the value of academic courses, extra classes, a uniform curriculum across schools; and the relative incapacity (or comparative institutional disadvantage) of schools and teachers as curriculum innovators (Clune, 1987). Research in schools can provide many insights about the validity and limits of such assumptions. The school as policy critic is an extension of the school as policy mediator. In both cases, the goals of policy are the reference point; and research examines how school level decisions affect those goals. But the school as policy critic allows for the possibility that the policy goals cannot be achieved at the school level, or that policies have adverse effects which outweigh the benefits of any goals achieved.

The least policy-oriented (and, thus, the most "contextualized") perspective is the school as policy constructor. Here, the assumption is that schools are engaged in the same kind of activity as policy makers-- the construction of ideal curriculum content and pedagogy -- at a level which responds to a different set of needs and priorities. Schools, under this view, are not simply or even primarily the implementors of exogenous policy commands; but rather have their own complex, shifting and contradictory agendas. On the one hand, these field level agendas for curriculum resemble the full range of plausible policy options more than they resemble the particular policy direction in force at a particular time (including, for example, aspirations toward high quality vocational, humanistic/elective and child-oriented education, as well as a movement toward more rigorous academics). On the other hand, school curriculum policies presumably operate with a different set of dynamics because they respond to different needs and political pressures (for example, on the idealistic side, the educational needs of complete, individual children; and, on the less idealistic side, powerful pressures toward routinization of instruction).

The view of policy as an initiative which must crowd in and compete with existing agendas has many important implications. To be effective, policy must overcome a much more complex set of obstacles and figure

out how to enter the ongoing "conversation" about curriculum policy which exists at the school level. Conversely, the view of schools as policy makers obviously has the potential for turning normal assumptions about hierarchy upside down. A close inspection of schools may demonstrate how schools need to change; but it may also demonstrate that policy should change. Policy may learn from schools as well as schools from policy, not simply about the weakness of a particular policy (as under the critical role) but also about entirely new possibilities.

The focus on school as context also introduces the possibility of benign subversion. What appears as sabotage from a policy perspective may look quite constructive and adaptive at the ground level. Much of the instability of policy, the constant adjustments and refinements, probably comes from its relationship with the school context. From this point of view, policy is an endless, recursive dialogue rather than a series of self-sealing implemented commands.

An interesting feature of the three perspectives is that they seem to require different theoretical frameworks and methodologies. The school as policy mediator requires a model of organizational dynamics oriented around the particular policy outcome (for example, academic course taking). The school as policy critic requires a more analytical model of hypothesis testing (what must be true at the school level to support the assumptions of policy). The school as policy constructor requires a model of schools and teachers as involved in the social construction of reality (both knowledge and action) and a methodology which is correspondingly more anthropological and ethnographic.

Policy and School Context as Mutual Perspectives

The notion of the school as offering three different "views" or "perspectives" raises an important methodological or epistemological issue -- how to do research on social locations which differ in both factual context and normative perspective. Policy context and school context are not simply places where different things happen, they also are places with different normative standards (looking at things through different lenses, as it were). Because the fundamental issue is much broader than the topic of this paper, the discussion here cannot do it full justice.[1] Rather than plumbing the issue to its depths, I will try to clarify some basic points of and sketch in areas of likely consensus.

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[1] The broader context would include not simply all research on implementation, with its inevitable clash between policy and field level perspectives, but all research on differentiated social structures, like race, class, and gender. One of the disorienting (but also invigorating) features of contemporary social science is the description of the same social events told from different perspectives (a problem, by the way, with direct significance for the curriculum, as in the debates over Hirsch, Bloom, Bennett, etc., efforts to define a standard canonical curriculum).

First, to have the issue at all, we must be dealing with a situation where both perspectives actually exist. This is not necessarily or always the case. If curriculum policy were completely irrelevant to the school, we would no longer have a topic of "policy in the school context," but only "school context" (or "policies which never make it into the school context in the first place"). Many policies do not affect schools at all. But curriculum policies like graduation requirements, standardized tests, curriculum guides, and textbook selection seem to have strong (if not always positive) impacts. In other words, the topic of "curriculum in the school context" is an important one partly because neither partner overwhelms the other; both have significant impacts.

Second, though sensitive to school context, this paper adopts a systematic policy perspective. Each of the categories (mediator, critic, constructor) can be considered "policy-centric," because the common thread is what policy can learn from school context. On the other hand, each perspective also can be characterized as "bottom-up" or field sensitive because the school context is actually observed and taken seriously.

Third, though sharing a common policy perspective, the categories become less policy-centric in the order presented: the school as policy critic is less supportive of policy than the school as policy mediator; and the school as policy constructor begins to recognize the school as an appropriate source of alternative policy perspectives. Normative perspective can shift even with categories. Within the "mediator" category, for example, one might take a strong policy perspective, like agency theory (McDonnell, 1988), and characterize all divergence with policy as "shirking" by the schools. Or, one might take the more traditional view of implementation research and think about building on variations in local goals and capacities (Berman, 1984).

Fourth, the importance of the common policy perspective becomes apparent when we realize that some commentators take the opposite approach, becoming "school-centric," and evaluating policy from the perspective of its impact on the desirable goals of the school (Cuban, 1984: David, 1987).

I am convinced that there is no objective criterion capable of specifying which perspective is "correct," which kind of "centrickness" really is central. Good reasons exist for taking either perspective. On the side of policy, one might rely on the force of law, the political consensus of democracy, the need for action, the undesirable state of local practice, the healthy prospects for progressive change, or the intrinsic wisdom of the policies. On the side of a school perspective, one might rely on the wisdom of those closest to the children, the unwisdom of the policies, suspicion of politics, or skepticism about the feasibility of change or "remote control" (that is, about the feasibility of policy itself (Cuban, 1984; David, 1987). In one sense, the choice comes down to the personal world view and political stance of the researcher (for example, the job that one has been asked to do).

In another sense, the discrepancies become less sharp and polarized in a genuine dialogue. If the analysis is open to the interplay of policy and school context, most essential facts will surface; and different normative perspectives will emerge more clearly when coupled with specific facts. The only important general point is that the shift from policy to school context involves not simply a different factual foundation but often a difference of normative perspective as well. Part of the challenge and subtlety of policy analysis is the often implicit choice of normative perspectives (for example, taking the "purposes" of policy, themselves often ambiguous, as a given, while remaining free to criticize policy results against some independent standard, like quality education more broadly defined) (see generally, Kennedy, 1987).

General Differences Between Policy and School Contexts

The previous section discussed how to manage research on differing factual and normative contexts. This section discusses some general differences between policy and school context which give make that kind of discussion necessary. What explains the distinct perspective of the school? How are policy and school different?

The easiest place to begin is with the most basic lesson of implementation research, that policies are shaped and changed during implementation because of the discretion exercised by the field level agents who actually deliver services. Despite the fundamental and by now obvious nature of the general proposition, actual research on implementation never fails to reveal important and interesting insights about the interaction of policies and local, variable circumstances and discretion (McLaughlin, 1987).

In the case of schools (or any other policy target), these general categories of discretion and variable local circumstances can be usefully refined and specified.

First, the political and educational goals of the school may be different. Schools and teachers may favor policy goals, or alternative goals (e.g., vocational education, electives rather than a required core curriculum, rote learning rather than higher order thinking). Schools are more likely to be responsive to the demands of their clients (e.g., for less homework, more extracurriculars). Above all, schools and teachers have views of student capacities. Beliefs that students of different abilities are capable of learning different things goes a long way to explain pervasive stratification of learning opportunities. Some of the more sophisticated research on policy focusses on the indigenous cultures of schools, embedded conceptions of knowledge, and the like (Cohen, 1987; Cusick, 1983; Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1985; Sarason, 1971).

Consistent with the idea of diverse educational goals, one of the basic experiences of research in the school context is the encounter with a range of opinion and perspective about curriculum which is much broader than the approach of new policies. Policies can be justifiably criticized as fragmented and "irrational," but a set of policies enacted at

any given time is likely to be more coherent than policies over the long run. Because the school as an organization has developed over the long run, and contains people of different ages and backgrounds, perspectives at the school site are likely to resemble the diversity of historical opinion more than the coherence of a specific historical moment. Consequently, the researcher is likely to observe a variety of curricular philosophies distinct from current policies and from each other.

Second, schools inevitably will experience a broader array of considerations bearing on the policy objectives than policy makers concerned with specific policy instruments. A primary consideration confirmed by our own research is the need to keep students in school and engaged in learning (see McDonnell, 1988). Schools often will bend over backwards to keep students in school (one reason for stratification of learning opportunities). Schools also are sensitive to the need for engaged teachers (partially explaining concessions to teacher preferences of subject matter), as well as other preconditions of effective instruction (a safe an orderly environment, a school culture supporting academic achievement).

Third, is the "bottleneck" phenomenon -- schools are collective enterprises which must integrate a variety of policies with a variety of local goals. In one sense, schools are the end of the line for policy fragmentation (Cohen, 1983), the place which must pick up all the loose change and somehow create an effective integrated program. For example, schools must implement new subject matter requirements with their own inventory of subject matter specialists (teachers) and subject matter goals (things the students should learn). Some schools in our study implemented new social studies requirements in light of the existing social studies programs and faculties. In one district, a school decided to teach American rather than ancient world history to immigrant students in need of basic socialization into American society.

Fourth, schools must allocate resources and have different amounts of resources to allocate. Increased graduation requirements presented schools with the problem of how to allocate experienced math and science teachers. Most schools seemed to have responded by sending the more experienced teachers to the upper track (teaching college bound students) (McDonnell, 1988). In addition, schools varied in number of experienced teachers they had to allocate. Urban schools with high turnover tend to have fewer experienced teachers and were more often presented with the problem of teachers teaching out of field (e.g., shop teachers moved to basic level mathematics).

The School as Policy Mediator

The school as policy mediator is the first, least critical perspective on policy provided by the school context. The essential insight is that schools make decisions relevant to policy; and, from a pro-policy standpoint, the objective is to encourage decisions which are most favorable to policy goals.

In the recent wave of educational reforms, the most important kind of discretion exercised by schools was the quality of courses offered to different groups of students. The combination of graduation requirements (regulating selection of courses by students) and curriculum control (regulating the content of courses) was not tight enough to prevent wide variations in the level and quality of courses. Consistent with a very general policy requirement, like "3 mathematics" courses, schools offered drastically different levels of math (remedial, basic, general, college prep, etc.). In other words, the existing system of stratified learning opportunities (Gamoran, 1987) was largely reproduced in response to the new policies.

In addition to variations in the level of courses were variations in quality and, in particular, some evidence of repetition and watering down of course content. Some districts allow watering down in both time and content, for example, one district which responded to reform by offering 7, 50-minute periods as a substitute for 6, 60-minute periods (a decline of 10 instructional minutes but an increase in number of courses and credits). Some respondents in this same district claimed that an additional math course was fashioned by stretching the content of General Math I into two courses. Watering down of content also may occur through the substitution of vocational equivalents (increasingly authorized by state law), for example, baking, nursing and cosmetic math.

A second important kind of response is remediation and alternate routes. One impact of high standards on low achieving students who have trouble meeting the standards is a proliferation of alternative routes (e.g., summer school, night school, adult education, GED's, schools with special missions and types of students). Such alternate routes may be good (contribute to the goal of academic rigor), by, for example, getting the student up to speed, or bad by, for example, providing a tempting safety valve with lower standards or serving as a dumping ground.

A third school level response which is important to the goal of increased academic rigor is the assignment and recruitment of teachers. Schools and districts do not have complete discretion about these decisions, but they do exert significant influence. For whatever reason, some schools are better able to stock new required courses with qualified teachers (e.g., math courses taught by teachers certified in math vs. courses taught by coaches displaced by declines in P.E. enrollments).

These examples are sufficient to show the large amount of discretion which exists beneath the level of formal compliance (offering courses with the required labels). Evaluating the substance beneath the form actually is quite tricky, because, quite apart from the difficulty of gathering all the necessary data, one cannot automatically assume that more rigorous is better. Some lower level and remedial courses may do a better job at getting students up to speed and preventing academic failure than standard college prep courses offered to the same students. The ideal compromise may be relatively rare up to this point -- an effort to convey the essence of higher order content at a somewhat slower pace. Hence, even the top down analysis called for in this section demands an

extraordinary understanding of what is going on in the school context.

Correcting stratification of learning opportunities and variations in course quality -- in other words, drastically upgrading the course content for lower track students -- is the great unfinished task of curricular reform. In an effort to control school level discretion, policy makers might be tempted to approach the task with a much tighter set of policies. An understanding of the school as policy mediator should cast serious doubt on such a top-down approach. Even if state law required "Algebra," "Geometry," and "Advanced Algebra" for all students (instead of " 3 mathematics"), and specified the content of each course, many important decisions would be left at the school level. Teachers would not necessarily cover all the material (Freeman & Porter, 1988). If teachers were forced to cover the material by "pacing guides," students of different abilities might not learn the material well. If standardized tests controlled the award of course credit, many students might fail and drop out of school.

Ultimately, there is no substitute for teaching a quality course with high expectations appropriate for the particular group of students in a school. The teachers must know how to teach the material, be comfortable with the conception of knowledge, and believe that the students can learn what is taught. The school must be involved in planning a high expectations curriculum in a logical, coherent fashion (e.g., permitting paths from one level and sequence of courses to another). Remedial courses must "accelerate, not remediate" (Levin, 1988).

In other words, one of the critical unfulfilled tasks of curriculum policy is involvement of the school as policy mediator. The curriculum policy of the future should not be conceptualized as a set of mandates exhausting the task of policy and leaving only the mechanical exercise of school compliance. Rather, the delivery of high quality curriculum materials to the school should be viewed as only the first step, to be followed by subsequent phases of school wide planning, teacher training, and measurement of student performance. The appropriate conceptual model for such policy is something more like structured school-by-school instructional improvement than uniform state regulation (Fennema, Carpenter, & Peterson, in press; Slavin & Madden, 1988).

The School As Policy Critic

When the school context is viewed as a policy critic, the basic point is that existing policies have failed to achieve their intended goals, cannot achieve them given the realities of the school context, and, consequently, should be abandoned or fundamentally restructured. Such findings are all too common in policy research (for example, mastery learning and pull-out programs, Slavin, 1987; Slavin & Madden, 1988; Turnbull, Smith, & Ginsburg, 1981). In such a situation, the school still might be considered a "policy mediator," but, because of perverse incentives, the mediation inevitably produces effects which are contrary to policy goals.

As far as we know, the curriculum policies of the 80's were not of this kind, because they achieved modest progress toward the goal of a more rigorous uniform education for all students. There is, however, a school of criticism of curriculum policies that claims systematic policy failure in the school context. Curriculum controls are said to drag down the best practice of teaching, encourage the wrong kind of content for lower track students (rote memorization, drill and practice, etc., rather than higher order thinking), increase stratification between levels of courses (as a response to more rigid requirements, see Shepard & Smith, 1988), and drive the best teachers away from education (Darling-Hammond & Wise, 1985; McNeil, 1987a, 1987b).

Such claims to this point seem mostly speculative and unsubstantiated. Even more problematic, advocates usually do not specify the kind of curriculum controls being discussed, allowing each side of the debate to condemn the worst possible practices of the other (for example, advocates of curriculum control citing the worst examples of unregulated teaching and advocates of unregulated teaching citing the worst examples of curriculum control). CPRE does have some work in progress designed as an empirical test of some of the claims. The important point for this paper is a reminder of the possibility that research in the school context can demonstrate that a policy is unworkable rather than in need of further refinement.

The School As Policy Constructor

The view of school context as policy constructor allows for the possibility that schools can be sources of alternative policies rather than simply mediators or critics of the policies in currently in force. There is potential criticism here -- not the failure of existing policies to achieve their own goals but rather the narrowness of existing policies and the suppression of desirable alternatives at the school site.

In our research, we found school-level representation of all of the great rivals of the current philosophy of a rigorous, academic education. Advocates of vocational education claimed that vocational courses were necessary to keep students in school, far better for the employment prospects of the non-college bound, and often superior in content to the weaker academic courses. Champions of electives argued the merits of diversity and variations in individual student preferences, the cosmopolitan character of a diverse curriculum, the advantages of letting teachers teach in their favorite subject matters, and, again, the positive motivational impact of courses selected by students themselves.

As indicated by these examples, a common emphasis at the school site was keeping students in school and engaged in learning. Another application of this "student centered" perspective was tolerance for alternative educational experiences, such as extracurricular activities, alternative schools, night schools, special schools, schools within schools, and GED certificates.

The lessons of school-site normative dissensus for policy are not clear and place the researcher in a potentially difficult political position (researching the attainment of policy goals while becoming sympathetic to other goals at the school site). Perhaps the best that can be done under these circumstances is to call attention to some of the alternative policy goals which seem to deserve special recognition. In my own research, I recommended a "second look" at high quality vocational courses and streamlined requirements which did not interfere so greatly with electives and extra curricular activities (Clune, 1989).

Teacher and Classroom Perspectives

As mentioned above, the CPRE data base did not include classroom observations, but the interviews did include some questions on the impact of curriculum policy on teaching practice summarized in (Richards & Shujaa, 1988).

Another source of insights about the interplay of policy and teaching, which is based on classroom observation, is emerging research on the elements of effective teaching practice (Fennema, Carpenter, & Peterson, in press; Peterson & Comeaux, 1987; Slavin & Madden, 1988; Smith & O'Day, 1988). At the risk of oversimplification, one general conclusion that might be drawn from this research is the lack of one-to-one correspondence between policy instruments and effective teaching.

Policy can deliver a high quality curriculum to the school doorstep, but the instructional practices most effective for teaching those materials are unlikely to be adequately described by the policy. For example, innovative mathematics curricula may truly aim at higher order thinking and active learning and, in that sense, encourage a particular kind of pedagogy (Romberg, 1988). But the actual pedagogy appropriate to achieving the curriculum goals requires special attention. To get students engaged in higher order thinking, problem solving, and active learning, teachers may rely on learning in groups, peer tutoring, new forms of teacher-student dialogue, creative exercises, and new kinds of examinations (Archbald & Newmann, 1988).

In other words, the realities of teaching may well argue against the kind of "scripting" of curriculum content which is popular in some curriculum policies. Scripting has a number of apparent advantages which explain its popularity. It is clear about its objectives; it looks easy to follow in practice; and it provides the weak teacher with a clear blueprint for instructional success. Unfortunately, the technique of breaking knowledge down into small, easily digested packets may be inconsistent with the kind of open-ended, complex problem solving intended by the next generation of curriculum policy.

In that case, the commendable goals of clear objectives, easy implementation, and "value added" for the weak teacher must be achieved in some way other than the scripted curriculum. The policy package which seems to be emerging combines very sophisticated but also clear

learning objectives, powerful pedagogical exercises, careful training of teachers, and much more sophisticated examinations.

Conclusion

The lessons learned from the school as policy mediator, policy critic, and policy constructor actually all point in a similar direction. From our own and others' research, we learn that schools and teachers must be actively engaged in the exercise of constructing a high quality curriculum for their students, that some types of curriculum policy have the potential for increasing stratification and thus lowering the overall quality of instruction, that schools and teachers have their own perspectives on curriculum policy some of which should be encouraged by policy, and that the "scripted" curriculum popular in some districts and schools may not provide the best means of translating sophisticated curriculum goals into teaching practice.

These conclusions have in common a recognition of the impact and importance of the decisions, knowledge and values operating in schools and classrooms. Curriculum policy probably should not abandon its efforts to push curriculum content and teaching in new directions. The emerging goals of sophisticated content, problem solving, and active learning seem especially worthwhile (Raizen, 1987; Romberg, 1988). But any set of curriculum goals, and especially those aiming for active learning, are likely to require a new and different blend of policy instruments.

In general, the new policy instruments appropriate to a second generation of curriculum policy should have a core set of higher learning (or content) objectives, interfere less with school, student, and teacher discretion (in that sense, be more "streamlined"), do a better job of enlisting the active cooperation of school decision makers and classroom teachers, and be expressed in accountability measures (examinations, demonstrations) more compatible with the new learning objectives.

Earlier, I made the comment that the new policies will resemble structured school improvement more than uniform regulation. The notion of "content restructuring" captures the goal of school restructuring built around ambitious goals of curriculum content. This type of policy would be much more ambitious in its goals than existing policy (perhaps especially for low achieving students) but also would be much more sensitive to the school context.

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